

Proposed Washington Boulevard Local Historic District

Final Report



Washington Boulevard about 1927.
Photo from the Library of Congress,
Prints and Photographs Division,
Detroit Publishing Company Collection

By a resolution dated November 27, 2002, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Washington Boulevard Local Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Washington Boulevard Local Historic District consists of the properties located on the east side of Washington Boulevard between Clifford and Michigan; the properties on the west side of Washington Boulevard between Grand River and State; and the right-of-way of Washington Boulevard between Clifford and Michigan. All buildings are included in the Washington Boulevard District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

Boundary Description: The boundaries of the proposed historic district are shown on the attached map, and are as follows:

Beginning at a point, that point being the intersection of the centerline of Shelby Street with the centerline of Michigan Avenue; thence west along the centerline of Michigan Avenue to its intersection with the west line of the right-of-way of Washington Boulevard; thence north

along the west line of the Washington Boulevard right-of-way to its intersection with the centerline of State Street; thence west along the centerline of State Street to its intersection with the west line of the right-of-way of the north-south alley lying between Washington Boulevard and East Park Place; thence north along the west line of said alley to its intersection with the centerline of Grand River Avenue; thence east along the centerline of Grand River Avenue to its intersection with the west line of the Washington Boulevard right-of-way; thence north along the west line of the Washington Boulevard right-of-way to its intersection with the centerline of Clifford Street; thence east along the centerline of Clifford Street to its intersection with the centerline of the north-south alley lying between Washington Boulevard and Griswold Street; thence south along the centerline of said north-south alley and the centerline of the continuing north-south alley lying between Washington Boulevard and Shelby Street to its intersection with the centerline of the east-west alley lying between Michigan Avenue and State Street; thence east along the centerline of the said east-west alley to its intersection with the centerline of Shelby Street; and thence south along the centerline of Shelby Street to the point of beginning.

These boundaries include all the buildings having historic and/or architectural significance on the original portion of Washington Boulevard, with the exception of buildings located in other city-designated historic districts and located at the north end of the boulevard. (The portion of Washington Boulevard located south of Michigan Avenue was originally called Wayne Street, and does not share the planning development, and architectural significance of that portion of the street derived from the Woodward Plan.) The boundaries are the same as those of the Washington Boulevard Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and

DESCRIPTION: The Washington Boulevard Historic District extends three blocks on Washington Boulevard between Michigan Avenue and Clifford Street in downtown Detroit. The district includes eleven buildings facing Washington Boulevard; nine buildings on the east side of the street between Michigan and Clifford streets and three buildings on the west side of the street between State Street and Grand River Avenue. The buildings, which were designed by some of Detroit's most important architects, range from two to thirty-six stories in height and illustrate a range of architectural styles popular from 1900 to 1930. All structures are commercial buildings with the exception of a church and its adjacent office structure. Each of the eleven buildings contribute to the district, illustrating an important era in Detroit's development, the first third of the 20th Century.

The earliest building in the district is the Manufacturers National Bank Building, built in 1901 as the Stevens Building. Originally intended to be an adjunct facility for the nearby city YMCA, it was built when the street was still largely residential. Located at 1258 Washington Boulevard, the building was designed by Donaldson and Meier, a prominent Detroit architectural firm also noted for impressive church designs. This eight-story, brick, limestone and terra-cotta office building is designed in the Renaissance Revival style with an elaborately composed facade of varying window types crowned by a massive corbeled and arcaded Italian Romanesque style cornice treatment. This structure has been rehabilitated for residential use with commercial on the first floor.

The six-story, terra-cotta-sheathed, Palmer Building at 1420 Washington Boulevard was built in 1910 to the designs of nationally-known architect Albert Kahn. This “Chicago Style” design derives its visual impact from the overall sheathing of glistening white, molded terra-cotta and regular bays of large plate glass windows.

Five buildings in the district were designed by Louis Kamper as part of a private real estate venture by the prominent Book Brothers. The first of the buildings which Kamper designed is the thirteen-story, limestone-sheathed, Beaux-Arts style Book Building at 1249 Washington Boulevard. Built in 1917, this is a relatively sparsely ornamented office building of Italian Renaissance inspiration with eight stories of symmetrical bays of plain casement windows punched into a smooth masonry facade above the restrained, classically articulated, first four floors. The most striking feature of the facade are the twelve colossal nude caryatids supporting the boldly projecting modillion cornice. The Book Building is composed of two matching sections, with the southern three bays having been built later and internally constituting a separate structure.

The building Kamper designed next for the Book brothers is the twenty-one story Washington Boulevard Building at 234 State Street, on the northeast corner of Washington Boulevard and State, built in 1923. This office building is similar in character to the Book Building in its Italian Renaissance detailing, but is the curtain wall is brick with limestone trim. It consists of four stories sheathed in limestone surmounted by thirteen floors of regularly spaced unarticulated fenestration punched into plain red brick walls. The top four floors are set off by a massive molded limestone belt course. The windows are unified into vertical strips separated from the plain attic story fenestration by another limestone belt course. The building is capped with a projecting classical cornice. This commercial building has been rehabilitated for residential use.



The Book-Cadillac when new. Photo from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection

In 1924 Kamper designed the mammoth and elaborate Book-Cadillac Hotel at 1114 Washington Boulevard on the block between Michigan Avenue and State Street. Although the Beaux-Arts style had waned, Kamper’s own preferences made this an extraordinary Beaux Arts twenty-seven-story, luxury hotel originally containing 1,200 rooms. The building consists of four limestone-sheathed

stories enriched with colossal fluted

Corinthian pilasters between the fenestration surmounted by sixteen brick stories of unarticulated symmetrically arranged fenestration divided by limestone belt courses at several levels and bordered by massive oversized quoining at the corners. The upper four stories are unified into an elaborately ornamented limestone composition with extensive classical detailing. Two more floors are incorporated in the colossal bracketed cornice treatment, above which four, two-story pavilions with pyramidal, stepped roofs rise from the corners of the building.



The Book Building c. 1920 from Clarence Burton, *The City of Detroit, Michigan*, 1922.

One design element of the Book-Cadillac exterior should be specifically

noted. The Book brothers had lived in the old Cadillac Hotel built in 1888. When they demolished the old building for construction of the new one, they did so with some level of sentiment; for example, at the dedication of the new Book-Cadillac the family “dined at a table in the Venetian Dining Room situated in the same spot they had dined in the old Cadillac Hotel’s Dining Room.” This sentimentality appears to have had its impact on the exterior of the new building. The old hotel had square “tower” elements at each of its public corners, and in the center of the two major facades a solid wall breaking the recessed loggia that stood between the “towers.” On the new building, this pattern was reproduced at the top of the building. Instead of elements separated by a loggia, the corner “towers” rise above the attic story, while a sort of “pavilion” element rises above the attic in the center of the Michigan Avenue facade. The similarity to the old building cannot be an accident; it is reasonable to assume that the Books asked Kamper to somehow memorialize the old Cadillac Hotel in the design of the new one.

After the success of the magnificent Book-Cadillac Hotel, Kamper designed the thirty-six-story Book Tower at 1265 Washington Boulevard at the corner of the boulevard and Grand River Avenue and adjoining the 1917 Book Building. Completed in 1926, the Book Tower has been characterized as a somewhat unsuccessful attempt at a Beaux Arts skyscraper, especially by advocates of a more contemporary approach to the tall building. It harmonizes with the earlier Book Building by utilizing the identical detailing for the first twelve stories. Above the roof of its lower neighbor, the verticality of the Book Tower is relieved by occasional bands of oversized Italian Renaissance detailing. The fenestration of the upper four floors is vertically unified into a penthouse composition by colossal, unfluted, Corinthian pilasters and an incredibly elaborate Beaux Arts Baroque cornice treatment surmounted by a tall peaked copper roof. The design might well reflect earlier tall buildings—such as Ernest Flagg’s Singer Building in New York—in which a relatively plain shaft gives way to elaborate ornamentation on the topmost portion of the building, the portion most likely to be seen at a distance, since it would rise above all its neighbors. Whether one accepts this model for the tall building or not, in one matter Kamper got it right: the detail high on the building is extremely large in scale in order to be read at a distance. Kamper’s original plans called for the construction of an even taller building south of the original Book Building, but this was never carried out.



St. Aloysius with the Chancery to the left and the Washington Boulevard Building to the right. Photo from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Detroit Publishing Company Collection

Abut 1927-28 Kamper designed for the Book family the twenty-two story, brick-and-limestone Industrial Bank Building at 232 W. Grand River Avenue at the northeast corner of Washington Boulevard and Grand River. This building differs from his earlier commissions in that it is more in line with contemporary concepts of skyscraper design. It is ornamented with Art Deco-influenced Gothic motifs, but derives its visual impact chiefly from the vertical emphasis of the continuous piers between the windows. The building tapers at the top with the use of minor setbacks and is topped by an ornate parapet wall. This building has been rehabilitated for residential use.

There were other property owners on Washington Boulevard in addition to the Book family. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Detroit hired Detroit architects Donaldson and Meier in 1924 to

design the Chancery, the archdiocesan offices, next to the church of St. Aloysius in the middle of the block between Grand River Avenue and State Street. The resulting structure at 1234 Washington Boulevard is an eight-story, limestone sheathed eclectic structure of Romanesque-Italian Renaissance inspiration. The facade is composed of three, slightly-recessed central bays flanked by buttress-like end bays. The arcaded first and second stories of the central three bays are surmounted by four stories of vertically unified fenestration with paneled spandrels. The upper two floors are treated as a gabled, arcaded, open loggia. In addition to the diocesan offices, the structure contains living quarters for the clergy assigned to the parish church next door.

In 1930, Donaldson & Meier designed a new church for St. Aloysius adjacent to the Chancery Building. Since the church is abutted on both sides by buildings, it only has one public elevation. This facade is a limestone Italian Romanesque composition ornamented with extensive Romanesque carving, grouped pilasters, arcaded corbeling, open arcading, a rose window and carved, arched, door surrounds. The exceptional interior of the church was intended to provide a large capacity on a small site, with seating on three levels including a large “U” shaped gallery, and basement seating having a view of the altar thorough a large open well in front of the chancel. The interior is richly decorated, with a considerable quantity of fine marble and a large mosaic on the rear wall of the chancel.

With the end of the economic boom of the 1920s, plans for several projected large office buildings were shelved. Their planned sites today are occupied with two-story commercial blocks. The building at 1242-54 Washington Boulevard of concrete construction dating from the 1920s is a row of shops surmounted by large Chicago style windows on the second floor and ornamented with Corinthian pilasters. The northwest corner of State Street and Grand River Avenue, which was to have been occupied by a second Book Tower, was subsequently developed in the 1930s with a two-story, concrete block of shops of plain Art Deco design with large plate glass windows on both the first and second floors, 1201-1223 Washington Boulevard.

The proposed Washington Boulevard Historic District includes eleven buildings on Washington Boulevard as follows.

- Book Cadillac Hotel, 1114 Washington Blvd.
- Washington Boulevard Building, 234 State (corner of Washington Blvd. and State)
- St. Aloysius Church, 1230 Washington Blvd.
- Chancery Building, 1234 Washington Blvd.
- 1242-1245 Washington Blvd.
- Stevens Building, 1258 Washington Blvd.
- Industrial Bank Building, 232 W. Grand River (at corner of Washington Blvd.)
- Palmer Building, 1420 Washington Blvd.
- 1201-1223 Washington Blvd.
- Book Building, 1249 Washington Blvd.
- Book Tower, 1265 Washington Blvd.

All eleven buildings are considered contributing structures.

HISTORY: In the mid-nineteenth century, Washington Boulevard, one of the “grand boulevards” laid out in the Woodward Street plan of 1807, was developed as an upper class residential area.

One of the residents was J. Burgess Book, Jr., scion of one Detroit’s wealthiest families. Book had long dreamed of transforming Washington Boulevard into Detroit’s most exclusive shopping district. After traveling extensively in Europe and the United States studying grand boulevards in various cities, Book returned to Detroit, where, in 1916, he became administrator of his father’s huge holdings.



Louis Kamper—photo courtesy of Detroit Chapter, American Institute of Architects

The estate included land on Washington Boulevard, which, with the help of his brothers, he increased until eventually the Book family controlled sixty percent of the street frontage. Book was influenced by the City Beautiful movement, which had grown out of the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. In Detroit, this popular movement resulted in 1915 in the retaining by the city of Edward H. Bennett to execute a preliminary master plan for the city. Bennett had earlier collaborated with Daniel Burnham on the much celebrated Chicago Plan, published in 1909. Although many of Bennett’s grand designs were not realized, his recommendations encouraged Book to plan a monumental Beaux Arts streetscape.

To carry out his scheme, he retained Louis Kamper, one of Detroit’s best known architects, to design the buildings. Kamper designed five buildings in all for the Book family. Each of these was intended to be an individualistic structure of architectural distinction that would fit into his overall streetscape plan, which he published in a still extant rendering entitled “Development of Washington Boulevard and the Book Estate.” With the exception of the Industrial Bank Building, all of the structures were Beaux Arts classical in design. The grandest was the monumental Book-Cadillac Hotel (1924) which marked the gateway to the Book development from Michigan Avenue. This building, now vacant and very neglected, retains its original appearance, as do the other Book buildings. The other key structure in the Book scheme is the ornate twenty-six-story Book Tower. The other structures on the street are strong supporting buildings of high architectural quality. The completion of the Book fiefdom was cut short by the onset of the Great Depression, although another Book Tower, seventy stories tall, was then in the planning stages for the site now occupied by 1201-1223 Washington Boulevard.

The Books were never able to control all of the land on Washington Boulevard and much of the street’s current architectural diversity is attributable to the structures erected by others. Before the Books had even begun building, several new commercial structures had already replaced the old houses and businesses on the street. The Steven’s Building (Manufacturers’ Bank Building) at 1258, designed by Donaldson and Meier and built in 1901; and the Palmer Building at 1420, built in 1910 to the designs of Albert Kahn, are the oldest buildings in the district.

A holdover from the area’s previously residential character is St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church (1930) and the archdiocesan offices in the Chancery Building. Both of these were designed by Donaldson & Meier, an important Detroit architectural firm that was well known for both its churches and office buildings. Although the present buildings date from late in the development of

the boulevard, St. Aloysius previously occupied a Victorian church on the same site, originally built as Westminster Presbyterian, and served for a short time as the pro-cathedral of the diocese. The Victorian bishop's residence—the chancery of the time— was across the street at 31 Washington, on the present site of the two-story building south of the Book Building. Thus, this stretch of Washington Boulevard has been the headquarters of the Catholic Church in Detroit for well over a century.

With the sudden onset of the Great Depression, construction in downtown Detroit, virtually ground to a halt. Plans for large new buildings on Washington Boulevard were shelved. As a result, the two-story block of shops at 1242-54 was allowed to remain, while the site previously set aside for the seventy-story, second Book Tower was eventually occupied by the two-story block at 1201-1223. Both of these low buildings contrast greatly with their tall neighbors but serve as a reminder that Washington Boulevard was a fashionable retail area as well as office district.

As a setting for the Books' downtown land development, Louis Kamper designed a monumental scheme, since destroyed, of Washington Boulevard as a broad boulevard ornamented with stone balustrades, formal promenades, statuary and a series of extraordinary Beaux-Art street light standards. The original street design was destroyed over the years with successive alterations. In 1978-79, half of the street was closed to traffic and Washington Boulevard was completely redesigned. New planting, new brick and granite paving, concrete planters, a continuous, linear metal truss sculptural element, and an amphitheater contribute to the street's new urban pedestrian mall motif.

SIGNIFICANCE: The Washington Boulevard Historic District is significant as an intact streetscape of architecturally distinguished commercial buildings dating from 1901-1930 with the majority built in the 1920s. The buildings individually represent some of the finest early Twentieth Century architecture in Detroit and as a group illustrate the evolution of the commercial style in Detroit as it was practiced by some of Michigan's master architects. The district is also significant as a product of a planned real estate development inspired by the City Beautiful movement and carried out as the private artistic endeavor of one family and their architect, Louis Kamper. The proposed district meets the first three criteria of the city's ordinance, found in Chapter 25-2-2 of the 1984 City Code; those criteria are:

1. Sites, buildings, structures or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political, or architectural history of the community, city, state, or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified;
2. Sites, buildings, structures or archeological sites which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state, or national history.
3. Buildings or structures which embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural specimen, inherently valuable as a representation of a period, style, or method of construction.

RECOMMENDATION: The Historic Designation Advisory Board recommends that City Council designate the proposed portion of Washington Boulevard as an historic district; a draft ordinance of designation is attached.